

MAY 17, 1978, HEARINGS ON H. R. 12444

Prepared Statement of Larry Stevens

Numismatic Photographer and Editor, Member of Numismatic Literary Guild, and Consultant for Government Coin Programs.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: Thank you for an opportunity to testify. I have covered hearings of numismatic interest for 15 years, and served as bureau chief, accredited to The White House, and Press Photographers' Gallery, for 25 major Sunday newspapers for twenty-five years.

As a coin and medal photographer of some reputation, my illustrations are regularly published in numismatic books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as other media, and I have enjoyed access to the world's greatest and most interesting treasures. I have handled, and photographed, an estimated 100,000 different coin obverses and reverses - which means I really looked at them carefully. This work leads logically to an interest in the designs of coins and medals, because I am bound to the images presented on the objects themselves.

Today, our coin designs change so infrequently - perhaps ten times during my lifetime, and three of these were for the Bicentennial period only, I dare not wait for additional coinage to be minted before speaking out.

During our colonial period, a wide range of coins and tokens circulated. They were crude and featured interesting symbols - and some were artistic, by any standards. By comparison with these, and our private and territorial pieces of the 19th century, much of our U. S. coinage may fairly be described as "boring" in appearance.

The flat, efficient, long-wearing coins, produced by modern mints each year by the billions, to meet the needs of their populations, have contributed greatly to a decline in the artistry of coins, which were once produced by artists and craftsmen. The twenty dollar gold piece, our famed double eagle, was worth twenty dollars. Now we are expected to note with some pride that a new dollar may be minted for three cents. A comparison of the small dollar with the St. Gaudens' designs for our early

20th century coinage, similarly, is an interesting one.

It is not surprising that Members of Congress find it difficult to intelligently explore the maze of our nation's mint and medal programs. There are gaps in our medallic history that a 747 aircraft could fly through, and an amazing array of subjects featured on our coins. We have had no discernable direction and long-range planning of artistic-historic coin and medal design for longer than I can remember, and am not aware that the Mint is responsible to provide any. Perhaps we do not now require an Assay Commission, while our coining metals have no value - but I believe our nation needs, and deserves a Coin and Medal Commission, to provide a worthy and intelligent program, with logical criteria for all designs and categories of Congressionally-directed coin and medal production.

As a sampler of the current state of art in our coin design, I submit my own limited observations of the Mint statement, presented at the last Subcommittee hearing on May 17th. There were four short paragraphs on "Design."

Paragraph one identified Benjamin Franklin as the "lone exception to the abstract or Presidential designs" (on our circulation coins). Are the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, Lincoln Memorial, Monticello, American indians, buffalo, and even an eagle on the moon "abstract?" Surely, no more confusing than approximately twenty different "Miss Libertys."

In paragraph two, the "modernized" Liberty Head (of the 1793 half cent) is said to be an "American design...appropriate....once again to return to an American coin." One may read, in the Mint's revised 1972 catalog of medals (page 291), "Libertas Americana (medal)...one of (French chief engraver Augustin Dupre's) most inspired creations...was copied - though crudely...for early American coinage." Reading on, we learn it was commissioned by Benjamin Franklin as a "handsome and ingratiating instrument of propaganda...of the obligations we are under to this (French) nation." He presented gold copies to the King and Queen, silver ones to ministers and the President of (our) Congress.



Perhaps we must be grateful the other side of that "American" medal was not selected for a coin. It depicts a helmeted female (France), about to spear a leopard (Great Britain) with "coward tail" (between legs) - which is attacking a helpless (America) infant in cradle.

The Phrygian cap - worn to mark free man from slave in an ancient Roman province - is a symbol with which I have never identified, because we need nothing to separate our people. There are almost as many versions of that cap as we have "Miss Libertys" on coins, but it did not appear on the first Mint coin designs of 1792, nor on the one cent piece of 1793. It was an unpopular coin, and the design was changed for 1794.

The third paragraph informs the Subcommittee: "The eagle appeared on the reverse of every dollar coin since 1794 with the exception of gold coins." The Mint forgets the reverse of it's 1976 Bicentennial Eisenhower dollar, which may not be one of our most memorable coins, and that it permitted eagles to be removed from all Bicentennial coin reverses. Having attended the judging, I remember this fact very well.

I agree with paragraph four, which would seem to recommend elimination of actual persons from our national coinage in the foreseeable future. Most numismatic interests would agree that outstanding citizens and events are best honored and rewarded through commemorative coins or Mint medals, which are entirely appropriate and adequate.

My observation about the Eisenhower dollar is that it is time for a graceful exit. President Eisenhower has a secure place in our national history, and the continuance of that coin in a 40% silver proof version only - should a small dollar replace it in circulation, would escalate collector complaints that it is retained to support private institutions through continued diversion of coin fees. I should state that I have never received an Eisenhower dollar in change, and that circulating issues, when obtained from fresh-minted bank sources, were actually very unattractive in appearance and unsuited for photography. Proof coins were substituted.

If the need for a small dollar design makes it impossible to wait for the coin research I have suggested, there are other avenues for the Mint to explore at reasonable cost.

1. Congress has the use of excellent coins designed and struck previously as Regular Issue or Pattern coins. If the Mint can copy the 1793, it may equally select any other designs for coins. I'm very partial to those dating from about 1875 to 1916. Designs may be "muled" - different combinations of obverse and reverse designs than have previously been struck - to avoid any possible confusion with earlier issues. Examples of outstanding designs are available from the Mint Collection, held by the Smithsonian Institution.
2. Bicentennial coin designs, many of them featuring eagles, are in Mint storage and may readily be restudied or judged for use on the new small dollar. No artist who entered the Bicentennial competition would decline the honor of having their work selected for regular issue coining. A reasonable monetary award would be more than matched by the fame attendant upon such recognition.
3. Or an American favorite. A national small dollar design contest, celebrating "designers lib" - a chance to design one or two sides of an American coin, rather than use a government-engineered one, ~~although~~ Mint designers would also be allowed to compete - entries are coded to conceal artists' names during judging.
4. Any combination of the above. Such efforts, through attendant free press coverage, would allow the Congress additional time to determine public acceptance of a small dollar. If people won't use it, this coin will add another historic chapter in the study of unsuccessful Mint issues. If it is beautiful, and meaningful, it may be popular.



I cannot separate artistic-historic designs from the metal in which they are struck. Nothing survives so well as gold, nor exceeds it's desirability and beauty. Civilizations, empires, rulers, governments - and peoples disappear. But their gold often remains for the enlightenment of those who follow.

The gold in our Mint Depositories, stacked floor to ceiling and wall to wall, is an impressive sight. But much of it represents the struggle of mankind to survive. It doesn't require much imagination to realize that we did not mine all this gold, and that we have a responsibility to those who did. It is estimated that 85% of the gold mined through all of history remains available for use. And we certainly have our share in the form of heavy golden bricks.

I urge the Committee to recommend that our nation undertake a major program to improve the survivability of our deeds as a people through a monumental medalllic art program. It would employ our best artists and sculptors to create an artistic history of the United States. It would have two major goals:

1. To record the major achievements of the American people, as a group, as individuals, and at different stages of our history. It should be set down accurately and intelligently, neither boastful nor overly modest, and seek to identify our aspirations and principles, strengths and sacrifices. Individual medals must feature artistic quality so beautiful and important that other nations and people throughout the ages will enjoy and appreciate it.
2. To insure the survivability of our national history. I believe a logical medium is the large medal struck of gold, and dispersed to many parts of the world. These beautiful gold medals would be reserved for major archival and museum storage and display - and presented as gifts of the American people to governments, perhaps by the President of the United States. In this way, we return gold to the lands from which it may have come, and insure survival through dispersion. Bronze copies would be available for private and other use.

We would require only a part of what the government sells at auction, chiefly to European banks, to create a truly National Treasure.